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## Contras' Band

*Exile group plays a new tune*

The occasion had an artificially mysterious air about it. Two weeks ago, telephone calls were placed to journalists from New York City to Caracas urging them to dial a Miami number for information about an upcoming meeting on U.S. soil of the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (F.D.N.), a coalition of Nicaraguan exile groups that are opposed to the leftist Sandinista regime in Managua. When leaders of the F.D.N. showed up at a Fort Lauderdale resort hotel last week, the conclave turned out to be about as clandestine as a charity clambake. The real purpose of the get-together: to spruce up the F.D.N.'s public image in a bid to widen its base of support in the U.S. and Central America.

The coalition does indeed suffer from a public relations problem: many of its *contras* (counterrevolutionaries) served in the unpopular National Guard under Somoza, who was overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979. The extent of U.S. involvement with the F.D.N. remains unclear, but the CIA is known to be arming and training the *contras* so they can stage raids into Nicaragua from bases in neighboring Honduras. These connections, in fact, have cost the F.D.N. the potential support of other exile leaders, most notably Edén Pastora Gómez, a former Sandinista leader who now lives in Costa Rica.

The F.D.N.'s public relations debut last week did not go smoothly. The *contras* announced a new leadership team in a bid to attract other anti-Sandinistas under a broadened F.D.N. umbrella. But more questions were raised than answered. The six new leaders stressed their opposition to Somoza as well as to the Sandinistas. But the biographical handouts were suspiciously skimpy. The group was an odd mix: from the respectable Lucia Cardenal Salazar, the widow of a Somoza opponent killed by the Sandinistas, to Enrique Bermúdez, a colonel in the National Guard and Somoza's defense attorney in Washington from 1976 to 1979.

The Nicaraguan exiles strained credulity when they claimed to know nothing of the F.D.N. raids from Honduras. Acknowledged Cardenal after the clumsy performance: "We were better in rehearsal."

The public relations effort left many other Nicaraguan exiles unconvinced that the organization had changed. From



Leader Enrique Bermúdez at news conference  
*Inauspicious debut for anti-Sandinistas.*

his hilltop home overlooking the Costa Rican capital of San José, Pastora told TIME Reporter Timothy Loughran he still considered the F.D.N. bases in Honduras to be run by *Somocistas*, the name given the national guardsmen. Said Pastora: "It is a guard which until a short while ago was murdering us, and once it returns to Nicaragua, it will kill our young people, farmers and students."

In addition to their ineffective press conference, the F.D.N. received another setback last week: the House of Representatives voted 411 to 0, to bar the CIA from using funds to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. The Senate is scheduled to consider the bill this week. There is a loophole in the measure, however, that may make it only a symbolic gesture: the CIA could claim that it is using funds not for the purpose of toppling the Sandinistas but of stopping the flow of arms into El Salvador. ■